

<https://helda.helsinki.fi>

Approaching culture, negotiating practice : Finnish discourses on cultural diversity

Kimanen, Anu Leena

2018

Kimanen , A L 2018 , ' Approaching culture, negotiating practice : Finnish discourses on cultural diversity ' , Journal of Multicultural Discourses , vol. 13 , no. 4 , pp. 334-347 . <https://doi.org/10.1080/17447143.2018.1546309>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/300105>

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17447143.2018.1546309>

cc_by_nc_nd

publishedVersion

Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.

This is an electronic reprint of the original article.

This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Please cite the original version.



Approaching culture, negotiating practice: Finnish educators' discourses on cultural diversity

Anuleena Kimanen

To cite this article: Anuleena Kimanen (2018) Approaching culture, negotiating practice: Finnish educators' discourses on cultural diversity, Journal of Multicultural Discourses, 13:4, 334-347, DOI: [10.1080/17447143.2018.1546309](https://doi.org/10.1080/17447143.2018.1546309)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17447143.2018.1546309>



© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 19 Nov 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 176



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Approaching culture, negotiating practice: Finnish educators' discourses on cultural diversity

Anuleena Kimanen

Faculty of Theology, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

ABSTRACT

This article explores the ways in which 10 interviewed educators in Finnish multicultural comprehensive schools talk about cultural diversity. Recent theories and research try to avoid problematic views of culture, and some of their approaches can be found in the Finnish curriculum. Instead of defining discourses as sound or unsound this article seeks to understand the variety of discourses through discourse analysis. Two main discursive approaches viewed culture as significant and as insignificant in diversity. The interviewees mixed different discourses in order to present themselves as aware educators, but also to normalize the multicultural school as a workplace. Sometimes cultural essentialism and colour-blindness occurred, and instances of criticizing one's own thinking were scarce. Religious diversity was mostly talked about as a natural part of cultural diversity, Islam being constructed as the main 'other'. The discourses were also very much interwoven with the multi-layered negotiations concerning practice, and tensions between staff members were implicit. Discourses concerning cultural diversity should be scrutinized by educators and student teachers in order to increase awareness about the risks of both cultural essentialism and colour-blindness. Furthermore, educators need appropriate discursive practices to address diversity and privilege, to decipher situations, and to avoid cultural relativism.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 20 September 2018
Accepted 6 November 2018

KEYWORDS

Cultural diversity; teachers; headteachers; teacher discourses

Introduction

Cultural diversity increases in open societies and intensifies the need for competent educators who are able to adjust their teaching and school practices in an inclusive manner. Successful in-service education in those skills requires understanding how educators perceive cultural diversity. How do they define it and their own role? What are the critical points where cultural diversity challenges their theoretical or practical knowledge? This article seeks to map the ground.

However, culture is a disputed concept. Talking about different cultures seems to enhance a static, othering and essentialist view of culture. In other words, cultures are perceived as fixed entities with a direct impact on an individual's behaviour. This may lead to

CONTACT Anuleena Kimanen  anuleena.kimanen@helsinki.fi

© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

us-them dichotomies (Buchtel 2014; Nieto and Bode 2012, 159; Zilliacus, Paulsrud and Holm 2017). Simultaneously, recognizing cultural differences has been identified as the first step towards intercultural sensitivity (e.g. Buchtel 2014; Fischer 2011). Indeed, especially Cultural Diversity Studies have stressed the divisive nature of cultural diversity and the power struggle in which Western-centric ideas of shared notions are questioned (Shi-xu 2016).

There are some useful approaches to talking about cultural diversity in a non-essentializing way. For instance, Geneva Gay (2010) has presented a dynamic model of the interaction between culture and other features like age and residence. Ogay and Edelmänn (2016) proposed a metaphor of culture as a non-Newtonian liquid, both solid and liquid at the same time. A simple tool for many purposes is to regard culture as a process (e.g. Leeman and Ledoux 2005, 15; Nieto and Bode 2012, 159). Apart from the dynamic nature of culture, another noteworthy aspect of it is that each individual belongs to multiple different cultural and social groups simultaneously (Hahl and Löfström 2016). Moreover, many researchers have started to avoid culture as a key concept in tackling diversity because of its risks; instead, approaches like intersectionality, questioning normality, and social justice or anti-racist education have been introduced (Mikander, Zilliacus and Holm 2018).

Zilliacus, Holm, and Sahlström (2017) have shown that curricular discourses in Finland have clearly moved towards a social justice emphasis and full curriculum integration in multicultural education. Diversity is nowadays seen from pluralistic perspectives and as an intrinsic part of the school. It is mentioned in the general descriptions and within the competence area 'cultural diversity and language', but also in many subjects. However, privilege and power are not questioned.

The discourses on the curriculum level do not necessarily correspond to what happens in schools but reflect theoretical and political developments that the teachers either have or have not embraced. This article examines the discourses that educators working in multicultural contexts employ when talking about cultural diversity and practices related to it. Thus, it does not provide knowledge about educational practice, but takes the next step beyond the curriculum level, asking three questions. What kind of discourses concerning cultural diversity do educators use? How do they use them? What subject positions do they construct for themselves?

Teacher discourses and inconsistencies

There is some research on teachers' discourses about cultural diversity. In their quantitative research, Leeman and Ledoux (2005) began with a dichotomy between 'culturalist' and 'pluralist' views, the latter stressing pluriformity of all kinds, not only cultural. The survey data, however, did not conform to the anticipated four categories. Instead, clusters like 'enquiring attitude' and 'care and concern for each other' emerged. Edelmänn (2006) categorized interviewed Swiss teachers into four main groups: those who viewed cultural and other diversity as an enrichment, those who focused on language, those who recognized pupils as individuals without specific reference to their backgrounds, and those who did not consider cultural diversity as having any impact on their practice.

Rosén and Wedin (2018) paid attention to contradictions in Swedish teacher educators' talk when teaching a pilot group of non-native Swedish student pre-school teachers. They made an effort not to use any xenophobic language and to stress similarity between their

students, but also struggled to deal with the deviance of the students wearing hijab, revealing a lack of reflection on their own cultural assumptions. In Hahl's and Löfström's (2016) study, student teachers and teacher educators in an English-medium teacher education programme used four different strategies, all of which were problematic in some sense: stereotyping/othering, verbalizing experiences, distancing, and downplaying multiculturalism. The interviewees were inconsistent in that they constructed both sustainable and unsustainable positions towards interculturality.

In this article, inconsistencies in what participants say are treated as a normal phenomenon that occurs when people use discursive practices they have learnt to construct different subject positions in different contexts. The main problem is not whether the participants' attitudes are sound or unsound. Instead, the aim is to understand why certain discourses are needed.

Data and methods

The participants of this study are from three schools in the capital region of Finland. Around 30 per cent of the pupils in these schools has a mother tongue other than Finnish. In the Finnish context, such schools are usually considered multicultural. There are national language minorities, but in the capital region there are very few Sami-speaking children and Swedish-speaking children usually attend Swedish-speaking schools. The increase in linguistic and cultural diversity in schools is fairly recent. In the last decade, the number of children with an international background has doubled, although some 40 per cent of them are under school age. In 2016, 40 per cent of the children of non-Finnish origin were first-generation immigrants, but most of the second-generation children were under school age (Official Statistics of Finland 2016). Thus, the majority of the speakers of Finnish as a second language in Finnish schools are first-generation immigrants.

First, in order to recruit volunteers to be interviewed, and to map perspectives, staff members in these schools were invited to answer some open-ended questions on leaflets. On some occasions, notes were taken when the staff members were more willing to provide oral responses. This data will be referred to as a mini-survey.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 staff members, including 2 principals, 1 study counsellor and 7 teachers. The principals had long careers both as teachers and principals, whereas the others were had worked in education for between approximately 3 and 15 years. All the schools hosted years 1–9 but all the interviewed teachers and the study counsellor worked with secondary-level pupils, with the exception of participant 10, who also taught primary-school pupils. The interview themes included what cultural and faith diversity means in their school (or for the school), experiences of successful encounters and confusing ones, and their principles in dealing with cultural and faith diversity. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed (verbatim).

The data was analysed using Atlas.ti, following some principles of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1992, 2001). Fairclough has suggested analysing a (selected) corpus of discourse samples, but Wijsen (2013) has applied his levels of analysis to extensive interview data. The levels consist of linguistic practice (description), discursive practice (interpretation) and social practice (explanation). Description deals with features like vocabulary and grammar. Interpretation focuses on sociocultural resources, usually conceptions of persons, situations and things. Explanation seeks to establish the social

relationships that both are reproduced in and affect the discourse. This may include, for instance, constructing subject positions and agencies. In this article, the main focus is on interpretation and explanation.

Results

Significance of culture in diversity

When the teachers accounted for cultural diversity in the everyday life of their school communities, two types of discourses concerning cultural diversity emerged. First, the effect of culture was defined as insignificant. Seven of the 10 interviewees took this approach at least once.

I don't think that some issue would stem exactly from religion or culture, but it is an issue between people [...] (P1)

If they don't do it [good behaviour], it's not because of the culture but because they don't choose it, that they don't do it in that moment. They know how to behave. I believe they're pretty universal, criteria of good behaviour, in some sense. (P3)

In my view there's bigger difference based on which social class the pupil comes from, or what the home is like, than what culture or faith they represent. They have a stronger impact on teaching, behaviour or encountering the pupil. (P4)

Learning, success etc. doesn't depend on ethnic etc. background. (mini-survey)

When culture was insignificant in explaining pupils' behaviour or success, other factors were introduced, like social class, family or personality, recognizing multiple layers of diversity. Linguistic challenges were also mentioned. Another strategy in minimizing distinctiveness was to stress the diversity among native Finns:

Some things feel like self-evident, some dietary ... issues, but similar ... native Finns have similarly different diets. (P7)

It's also kind of cultural, like peculiar that you had to adapt to a new culture when you moved inside Finland from one place to another. (P8)

This discourse recognizes that diversity should not only be attributed to non-native Finns and although the distinction between non-native and native Finns is sometimes used to make this point.

Another discourse defined the effect of culture as significant. All of the interviewees used this approach in one or more ways. One common way of expressing the significance of culture was to talk about cultural differences as something worth knowing about. This discourse was especially frequent in the mini-survey, but also in the interviews:

I've tried to explain the cultural issue to the physical education teacher and then, tried to bring the perspectives of both [the teacher and a female pupil about wearing trousers] closer to each other. (P7)

Or some, cultural taboos for instance, that are hard to reach, when you have a trusting relationship with for instance a teacher [representing another cultural background] [...], then you dare ask. [...] That how I bring up this issue [...]. 'Cause these issues do exist. (P8)

[Because of two months spent working in an African country] you know that in different countries people act differently and some of their conceptions simply, coming from there, are different from us Finns. Like some conceptions of time or similar things, or even respect issues, like, go in families, and sometimes even according to gender differently from what we in Finland have got used to. (P9)

It is worth noting that especially participants 7 and 8 adopt this discourse to decipher individual cases, not to explain certain groups' behaviour as a whole. Participant 9 talks about different conceptions as something inherent and partly distinguishes between 'us Finns' and 'them', but for her too, it is about widening her perspective from the initial single conception.

Significance was also expressed through statements that cultural diversity is interesting, an enrichment or beneficial for the pupils.

You learn ... in your work a lot about other cultures and religions, especially in health education as you discuss a lot there. Which is really interesting. (P6)

In my view they [pupils in this school] learn to [...] encounter diversity and different people. And I think it's a strength factor. (P8)

Diversity brings pupils a multifaceted experience of the world -> Not only Finnishness/Christianity. (mini-survey)

If cultural difference were completely insignificant, it would not have had the mentioned positive impacts on the teachers and pupils.

Eight of the 10 interviewees also talked about cultural diversity as something normal, but in different ways in relation to the significance of culture.

Well maybe it's so everyday life that you don't even think about it. It's not the issue here after all. (P1)

But here [in this school, as opposed to her previous school with less diversity] it [cultural diversity] somehow merges, it's here such a norm that it's somehow, not very visible. (P5)

It's somehow self-evident, that we are all different. (P6)

Terribly bad reputation, but everyday life there [in his previous school] isn't, not at all as difficult as is conceived. It's the same here. Of course, there are challenges, but they are everywhere. (P8)

Well, it's our everyday life. [...] that you seldom stop to think about it other than it's visible in these arrangements, like food for instance, not everybody may eat everything. And because it's so commonplace here, it's not a big deal. (P10)

In these excerpts, participants 1, 6 and 8 seem to talk about cultural diversity as normal in relation to the discourse of insignificant culture. Participant 5 talks about visibility and recognition of diversity, and participant 10 about catering to diversity as a normal action, so they are more inclined to culture as significant. However, for all of them, this probably had the function of fighting the tendency to depict multicultural schools as troubled places full of problems, as explained by participant 8.

None of the participants talked about culture as exclusively significant or insignificant. Often, the approach depended on the context, but two interviewees balanced the one with the other.

What, for myself, I really have to orientate myself towards what this means and why this is such a bad thing and so, [...] but it's not like it would cause more challenges than other issues. (P1)

Of course, it's visible when there are some of these ... holidays and so [...] but then again on the other hand, I don't consider it very conspicuous. (P6)

These interviewees mostly talked about culture as insignificant. For them, the need to maintain the consistency of this position was so important that they hurried to minimize the significance of culture as soon as they had expressed such a perspective.

An important discourse in almost every participant's interview was respecting encounter as individuals. The discourse was used for different purposes.

And then kind of, try to avoid all stereotypes about any, culture, and encounter as individuals. Like they are, that they are really different, like people are in general. So I haven't in fact experienced any terrible problems so far. Should I have? (P6)

In my view, people should be considered people and not so much cultural, representatives of their cultures. [...] This is how it goes. It's really the same whether they are children or adults or ... everybody is subject to the same laws, basic human principles. (P7)

Dealing with this diversity and multiculturalism is always about encountering the human being, the individual, and the family. We all have our own histories, family backgrounds and you cannot generalize them behind some ethnicity or language. [...] And the human being is always a human being, a personality. And when you encounter a human being on a personal level as a human being, it's somehow the best way. To cooperate and to interact. (P8)

That instead of [...] giving an awful lecture that you have a test in physics tomorrow and why don't you shape up, I got like, new information on him [by asking questions about his Islamic RE class and religion in the family] and after that we really got the energy to work a bit. (P2)

Participants 6 and 7 justify the insignificance of culture here. Participant 6 even underlines her position by challenging the interviewer, asking whether she was expected to have faced clashes between cultures. Participants 8 and 2 justify the significance of culture here; for participant 8 it is something to be recognized and for participant 2 it is a vital tool in creating good relationship.

Both the discourses, culture as significant and insignificant, have risks when their social dimension is analysed. Stressing cultural differences easily constructs positions of 'us' and the 'others' and may construct stereotypes. Stressing the insignificance of cultural differences, however, risks blindness to both one's own cultural assumptions and to power imbalance (Nieto and Bode 2012, 156, 159; Ogay and Edelmann 2016; Shi-xu 2016).

In this data, using both discourses seemed to allow the participants to position themselves as aware educators who tried to avoid classifying their pupils while also recognizing diversity in norms and values. They also normalized their school environment: contrary to common assumptions, the pupils were no different to students everywhere else and the multicultural school was an interesting place to work in.

But did they always manage to balance their discourses so that the risks were avoided? At least there was one example of a combination of colour-blindness and power relations.

Mohamed¹ was the only dark guy in that class and the others were white, not everybody always Finnish but white anyway. Then [a group of pupils] chatted 'O boy, those dark guys are like ...' Then one said there that no [they aren't], that Mohamed is [a dark guy] too. Then they turned to look. Then the guy who had talked said 'No he isn't, he's Mohamed.' He didn't have a skin colour. Mohamed didn't. (P3)

In the narrative, the teacher praises the pupils' attitude that their friend has no colour but ignores the fact that the exemption from their friends' racism did not provide Mohamed with full recognition of his identity.

In one occasion reducing otherness through comparison with the Finnish situation led to a certain degree of ethnocentrism.

But then [after discussing marriage in Somali culture] we also talked about the fact that there have been arranged marriages also in Finland, at some point, a long time ago so ... So it's not

totally, like, strange ... Of course, for today's people yes, but if you are acquainted with history, there are similar stages everywhere around the globe, it just goes at different rates. (P6)

The intention is to reduce the strangeness of practices brought up by Somali-background pupils but using an expression like 'a long time ago' constructs those practices as remote and backward. Western development is assumed as ideal and natural.

As to the risks of stressing cultural differences, there were some instances where either positive or negative differences were mentioned:

People of another culture are mainly ... much more open, so we have more life than many [other] schools. (P1)

People from other countries, if you can use such words, are often more polite than native Finns [...] (P3)

If we kind of, lump together, like, immigrants, so in principle I feel that they are, really positive. (P6)

That's also one issue in multiculturalism that ... That maybe those most grave cases of those porkie pie tellers maybe are these [cultural minority pupils] ... [...] but of course they are rare. (P2)

Some of the pupils coming from another culture have a fairly bad attitude especially towards female teachers. (mini-survey)

It can be argued that these excerpts (and there were other examples of positive differences) contain essentialist or stereotyped thinking. When talking about positive differences, the participants constructed themselves as in positive relationship towards cultural diversity. By talking about negative differences, they made sense of some behaviour they experienced as problematic. Simultaneously, many of them contain words that reduce the generalization like 'some of', 'if we lump together', 'sometimes', 'but they are rare'.

Three of the interviewees consciously analysed their own assumptions and stereotypes:

But I do feel that I have, I should recognize that I have developed a bit of a stereotype of them [Kosovans]. (P2)

But somehow my own prejudices, I came across them awfully often. And yes, even today, and it always brings me up short when I realize that again I stigmatize, because I somehow push the group, the prejudices related to a group on this child and pupil. (P5)

This is probably because I've been abroad for so long. Everybody is of course to their own culture and habits kind of ... well, looks at things from that perspective, but I could imagine that I've kind of internalized something stuck with me, that don't assume, but discuss first. (P10)

In the studies by Jokikokko and Järvelä (2013) and Layne and Lipponen (2016), some of the participants criticized power structures in education and their own practices, but interviewees in this study did not reach this kind of critique.

Religious diversity as part of cultural diversity

Swedish and Finnish principals interviewed by Rissanen (forthcoming) rarely talked about cultural diversity in their schools in an assimilationist vein – except concerning religion. For instance, when parents refrained from making requests to accommodate their child's religious needs, they were considered well integrated. In the data of the current article, such a distinction did not arise. The only reference to a problematic relationship with religion was in the following excerpt:

And then the interreligious dialogue that's now kind of only budding. It's part of culture, you can't remove it. (P10)

Here, participant 10 defends the view that religion cannot be separated from culture and hopes that religious views could be discussed more frequently. If it was self-evident, no defence would be needed.

On the contrary, the relationship between culture and religion is constructed on many occasions:

[...] use of skirts by the Muslim girl, which is, like, very important in some cultures [...]. (P7)
Mainly they concern Muslim culture, many taboos. (P8)
Well if I'm honest I think it's much harder to deal with [ice] hockey issues with hockey parents. (small laugh) [...] When it's about beliefs and culture issues everybody realizes that these are belief and culture issues and that you have to be, everybody is a bit cautious and everybody understands to respect the other, and you try to reach common perspective, what it could be. But when you discuss hockey issues ... it's often much more black-and-white. 'As this is the most important issue in Finland ...' (P1)

Whereas participant 7 talks about cultural differences within a religious tradition, participant 8 talks about religion as a culture. Participant 1, a principal, interestingly juxtaposes both culture and religion with sports. The 'hockey parents' require permission for their child to practice during school hours. Whereas culture and religion are sensitive but also subjective in the sense that the participants cannot expect the counterpart to fully agree and are thus ready to negotiate, success in sport, according to participant 1, is often constructed as a shared national goal.

A couple of the participants also explicitly argued against making religion invisible.

Whereas I'm not much like 'let's not talk about Christianity', although I don't talk about religion but if it comes up in a situation, so, in my view it's part of multiculturalism that we have many different religions. (P6)
You should be allowed to talk about it and it should be allowed to show. Scarves can be seen here but for instance crosses ... [shows her empty neck] crosses don't necessarily. I could wear one myself, as well, because somehow I would like to have a sign that I'm a religious education teacher. (P10)

This discourse opposes the idea that religion is something irrelevant to Finnish culture that 'the others' bring to the school reality. Interestingly, participant 10 constructs a religious education teacher as a person who should show her commitment to a religion, whereas an excerpt below will show that the other RE teacher, participant 4, sought to conceal her possible affiliation.

Some negotiations clearly took place in relation to religion. In the following, participant 10 constructs a lack of agency for parents from minority religions concerning school festivities.

But then about these festivities, for instance, there is some terribly ... kind of restrictiveness that we automatically assume that for instance the Christmas celebration is a problem. It doesn't have to be a problem, it just hasn't been discussed. And for instance, parents haven't participated in this discussion at all. [...] And when you privately discuss you realize that for many Muslims for instance the Christmas festivity in itself isn't a problem. That Santa Claus may be a bigger problem than angels for instance. So this kind of discussion hasn't really taken place. (P10)

What participant 10 constructs as an obstacle is the ignorance of the school staff and lack of dialogue. She justifies the necessity of this dialogue through wrong assumptions and unnecessary procedures.

It must be noted that religion in most of the excerpts means Islam. In fact, almost all the examples of cultural diversity that participant 1 brought up were about Islam and Muslims, whereas for others the variety was wider. There were references to Lutheran Christian elements in school culture, and some staff members identified themselves as Christians, but Islam was the main religious 'other'. This is also evident in the following two narratives on pupils' positions.

Pupils just taught to me, what was it, 'wallah' [...] And then I was like 'what does it mean', I had heard it but then they explained that it's like 'to the name of Allah.' 'You can say it when you want to say something, you want that the other understand that you are serious.' Then I said, 'but I'm Christian'. 'It doesn't matter, you can say it all right.' So it's pretty straightforward, their position, so I try to stay like them. (P6)

Yes [I've been] challenged in the way that 'you're wrong'. Although I never [small laugh] bring up my own thoughts of this kind but it's thought that I represent the Christians, and that 'you, how you believe, it's wrong' and that 'Allah is the only right.' In this vein. This never happened before. It must reveal that in the home they are, strongly exposed to these Islamist issues. Because, it's not only that they are strongly religious, but they have also had their views sharpened. (P4)

In both these excerpts religious inclusivity is constructed as an ideal position. Participant 6 does it in a positive way by constructing Muslim pupils as open and inclusive about their religion. Participant 4, for her part, defines Muslim pupils who challenged her alleged Christian faith as Islamists. Defining their exclusivist position as radical strongly constructs exclusive religious views as undesirable in a school context.

Responding to cultural diversity: negotiations

Several interviewees expressed views about how diversity should be dealt with in the school context. Many of them talked about this in terms of learning and language skills, and, although an important concern, this is beyond the scope of this article.

One discourse describing how issues related to cultural diversity should be solved was stressing that the school and the staff must change, thus welcoming diversity in the everyday life of the school.

The teacher knows how to encounter pupils having different cultures and develop both themselves and their teaching according to that. Sometimes you find teachers who do not have any information about other cultures whatsoever and therefore they have a bit more challenges with the pupils and their parents. (mini-survey)

You must always also see a bit that ... what you can, so that, if I give in in this issue, what are you prepared to [do]. In practice it leads to the situation that both give in. (P8)

We just can't do everything in the same manner. (P7)

It should be more visible, that it's only a little kind of raised, I mean as it would be quite easily raised as a strength of this school [...] that we would have festivities of diverse cultural groups and, languages would be better exposed and such, we have awfully little of that. (P5)

We're working on that [small laugh] cultural awareness, it's a part, that we could somehow engage the parents in better, more. (P10)

Accommodations made by the school staff took many forms. For the participants, it meant adaptations in one's teaching, new skills in encountering pupils and their families,

flexibility in arrangements, and multicultural events. In the literature, the latter has been referred to as a superficial form of intercultural education (Allard 2006; Zilliacus, Holm and Sahlström 2017). However, the participants talked about these events as a tool for increasing the involvement of culturally diverse families (P10) or raising the awareness of the school community (P5). Thus, the events were not justified on superficial grounds.

Another discourse constructed the responsibility of accommodation to the pupils and their parents, thus diminishing diversity in the school's practices.

We have been given a task by society, and if the Basic Education Act or the curriculum state something we see that it is fulfilled. [...] and then, what's not stated there, that's something we can negotiate. (P1)

Of course, when students come to the Finnish educational system, naturally they should be assimilated into this system, with respect for their background but anyway in a way that they have to have the flexibility and understanding that they are coming to the Finnish educational system. And they have to be supported there [...]. (P9)

Only participants 1 and 9 talked about the Finnish schooling system as the norm, and it must be noted that both of them left some space for negotiations. A related discourse stressed a Finnish code of conduct more generally.

There the help of Yuunus,² our Maths teacher, was worth gold, himself from Jordan and a Muslim, he could be there and distinguish between culture and Islam, and that in Finland after all, you don't categorize people like this [as bad Muslims], that if you have learnt this somewhere else, it's wrong and it becomes bullying in Finland, and each family may define themselves but others shouldn't be defined. (P1)

Here it [pupils' conception of gender equality] must be corrected, in the right direction, that this is Finland, here everybody is respected. (P3)

Sure, afterwards, the teacher had also said to the fathers that in Finland you can't talk like this [threaten violence]. (P10)

Both the schooling system (by participants 1 and 9) and a Finnish code of conduct (in the excerpts above) were presented without further justification.

On one occasion the need for uniformity at school was justified by the interest of the child:

Because the child often is in the weirdest position there when he/she does written assignments when the others sing so the child feels fairly bad about it ... Maybe the parent also realizes the position of the child at school, that the more different the child is made the more challenging a time the child is having. (P1)

Here participant 1 defines the pupil that cannot participate singing due to religious restrictions as deviant and suffering. The parent, not the school, is constructed as having the responsibility to change the situation.

Both discourses, accommodation as the duty of the school or the families, have their problems. In fact, one of the problems is shown also in some of the narratives containing the discourse of a Finnish code of conduct, namely, what can be called unrecognized ethnocentrism (Ogay and Edelman 2016). Stressing uniform regulations and equality as sameness may lead to assimilationist views that downplay diversity and power imbalance. On the other hand, stressing responding to diversity downplays the need for all pupils to learn both their own ethnic culture and shared culture, and also how to deal with other ethnic cultures (Allard 2006; Banks 2006, 112–120). It also risks cultural relativism.

Above, participants using the discourse of a Finnish code of conduct defined personal freedom, security and gender equality as issues which took priority over what could be permitted in the name of cultural diversity.

Again, half of the participants used both the discourses, stressing the need for adjustment on one occasion and its limits in another. This reveals the multi-layered negotiations that are going on in multicultural schools. The negotiation between flexibility and uniform requirements sometimes caused tensions between the staff, but also within an individual staff member's pedagogical thinking:

Problems are also caused by some teachers' too permissive attitudes towards immigrants' actions compared to native Finnish pupils. (mini-survey)

My own way of dealing with things is not awfully like this [strict], and then again I feel that some [pupils] would benefit from things being, like, defined, very clearly. And it would be so and it wouldn't be given up. (P2)

Children, young people are of course very ... pretty good ... at noticing if they are treated differently, either too much with kid gloves because they wear a scarf or in another way. (P1)

The respondent of the mini-survey and participant 1 justify uniformity of requirements here by equality between pupils, participant 2 by the interest of the pupil.

Inequality was defined as a situation where boundaries of flexibility were different for different groups. Differing groups of pupils or families were constructed as unequally treated.

I don't see it kind of, different from if somebody comes here [...] and says that our son, usually a son, must get to play ice hockey every Tuesday and Thursday 8–10 am. And then we ponder how much we can give in so that the Basic Education Act is fulfilled. And on the other hand, another [pupil] may do what she/he wants to. (P1)

Like, a family sets off to Las Vegas (small laugh) for two months [...] and it's ok for us 'cause it's a family thing, but when a Somali family does the same thing and goes to Somalia, we think that, well, now they are taking her, is there something that she's going to be circumcised there [...]. (P5)

Here participant 1 implies that a situation where sports practice was refused but cultural or religious requirements allowed would be unequal to sports pupils. Participant 5, however, states that common attributions are unfair to families of colour.

Beyond the continuum between flexibility and uniformity, negotiations also took place in relation to two other issues. First, there were concerns about the staff's own resources.

Here you have to be ready to encounter and put up with diversity [...] But then somebody sometimes gets nervous, or tiredness takes over, when one's reactions ... or they cannot control their emotions in a situation. (P8)

[We have] really open and receptive [staff] but then, on the other hand there are very draining issues here among their duties, that make people tired and therefore not everybody can cope. So, our language awareness team is promoting [things] in small steps. (P10)

This discourse justified the situation where the ideal response to cultural diversity was not fully achieved and constructed an understanding position towards colleagues.

Second, there was concern about preserving Finnish cultural tradition.

Being worried, I would like to say that when I use the word enrichment about multiculturalism, sure it is. But at the same time, you have to remember that we have our own traditions in Finland. And if you start to lose them, it's a bad thing. In my view we must keep on the

agenda those traditions we have. And if you think from the perspective of religion, you must have the freedom to arrange also this Christmas service for instance which has been debated a lot. (P9)

Diverse festivities, you certainly have to discuss them in the classrooms sometimes, for example why do you have to stand up, because it's a custom here when the last verse of the Christmas hymn is sung. (P10)

It is worth noting that the elements of Finnish cultural tradition that were particularly subject to negotiation were connected to Lutheran Christianity, the majority religion in Finland. The participants defined these as cultural traditions or habits, a practice that has been observed in previous research (Niemi, Kuusisto and Kallioniemi 2014), which is probably a valid strategy in a context that is expected to be religiously neutral.

Conclusion

The interviewed educators seemed to be aware of the risks of culturalism and partly also of cultural blindness. This is shown in their way of talking about culture as significant in some instances and as insignificant in others. Edelmann (2006, 239) has called similar practices insecurity in talking about cultural backgrounds. Certainly, wavering between the significance and insignificance of culture may reveal insecurity about which approach would constitute a desirable position for an interculturally aware educator. However, both approaches were also brought up as significant insights gained while working in a multicultural context, although some respondents stressed either one or the other. It might be important to recognize the role of both approaches in the identities of staff members in multicultural schools and the negotiation that takes place between them.

None of the approaches always constructed problematic positions in the participants' speech. However, there was some stereotyping (though minimized through different linguistic devices) related to the 'culture as significant' approach, and some colour- and power-blindness related to the 'culture as insignificant' approach. Some participants were capable of critical reflection on their own thinking but power structures or dominant discourses were not criticized. This is perhaps not surprising in a situation where the curriculum does not even expect it (Zilliacus, Holm and Sahlström 2017).

Normalizing the multicultural school as a working environment also seemed to be an important endeavour for many participants. The multicultural school staff did not only talk about diversity from an observer's point of view but, significantly, also took an agent's perspective. Practice in a multicultural school context proved to be a field of tension. The participants had to decide and negotiate on the limits of tolerating diverse values, flexibility in learning arrangements, and degree of preservation of Finnish traditions. Simultaneously, many of them constructed an understanding position towards overburdened colleagues and situations where goals were not reached, although tensions between staff members were implicit.

In this data, religious diversity was mostly talked about as a natural part of cultural diversity. Islam was constructed as the 'other': no other convictions were brought up as a deviation from the (Lutheran) Christian normality. Christian aspects of school festivities were defined as culture, constructing them as something that should be maintained in the religiously pluralist environment. Assimilationist views were not expressed, but a certain degree of inclusivity was expected from the religious pupils and families.

All in all, the discourse on cultural differences, even in the essentializing form, seemed to function as a means of deciphering situations, especially challenging ones. In contrast, the ethnocentric discourse of a Finnish code of conduct functioned as a way of avoiding cultural relativism. These needs could be met in a more reflective manner, but educators do not seem to have access to suitable discursive practices. New discursive practices could be developed with these needs in mind.

The implication for practice is that different discursive practices concerning cultural diversity should be analysed both in teacher education and among staff members in multicultural schools. Without this, some teachers may get the idea that certain discursive or linguistic practices should be avoided in all situations. As the case is not so simple, students and educators should engage in thorough scrutiny of the discourses. The risks of different approaches should be pointed out, but educators should also learn to talk about cultural diversity and power imbalances in a reflective manner. Among in-post educators, recognizing issues where negotiations are taking place or allowing open discussion about them could be an important way of diminishing tensions between staff members.

Notes

1. Pseudonym.
2. Pseudonym, also the subject and the country of origin have been changed.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by Ministry of Education and Culture Finland (grant no. OKM/39/523/2017).

Notes on contributor

Anuleena Kimanen, PhD, is currently a postdoctoral researcher in the Faculty of Theology at the University of Helsinki. Kimanen's research interests include religious education, interfaith competencies and attitudes, as well as teachers' intercultural competencies.

References

- Allard, A.A. 2006. 'A bit of a chameleon act': A case study of one teacher's understandings of diversity. *European Journal of Teacher Education* 29, no.3: 319–40.
- Banks, J.A. 2006. *Cultural diversity and education: Foundations, curriculum, and teaching*. 5th ed. Boston: Pearson.
- Buchtel, E.E. 2014. Cultural sensitivity or cultural stereotyping? Positive and negative effects of a cultural psychology class. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 39, no.1: 40–52.
- Edelmann, D. 2006. Pädagogische Professionalität im transnationalen sozialen Raum. Eine Studie über Sichtweisen und Erfahrungen von Primarlehrpersonen in Bezug auf die kulturelle Heterogenität ihrer Schulklassen. In *Kompetenzen und Kompetenzentwicklung von Lehrerinnen und Lehrern*, hrsg. G. Allemann-Ghionda and E. Terhart, 235–49. Weinheim: Beltz.
- Fairclough, N. 1992. *Discourse and social change*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Fairclough, N. 2001. *Language and power*. 2nd ed. Harlow: Pearson Education.

- Fischer, R. 2011. Cross-cultural training effects on cultural essentialism beliefs and cultural intelligence. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 35, no.6: 767–75.
- Geneva G. 2010. *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. 2nd ed. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Hahl, K., and E. Löfström. 2016. Conceptualizing interculturality in multicultural teacher education. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses* 11, no.3: 300–14.
- Jokikokko, K., and M.-L. Järvelä. 2013. Opettajan interkulttuurinen kompetenssi – produkti vai prosessi. *Kasvatus* 3/2013: 245–57.
- Layne, H., and L. Lipponen. 2016. Student teachers in the contact zone: developing critical intercultural ‘teacherhood’ in kindergarten teacher education. *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 14, no.1: 110–26.
- Leeman, Y., and G. Ledoux. 2005. Teachers on intercultural education. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice* 11, no.6: 575–89.
- Mikander, P., H. Zilliacus, and G. Holm. 2018. Intercultural education in transition: Nordic perspectives. *Education Inquiry* 9, no.1: 40–56.
- Niemi, P.-M., A. Kuusisto, and A. Kallioniemi. 2014. Discussing school celebrations from an intercultural perspective – a study in the Finnish context. *Intercultural Education* 25, no.4: 255–68.
- Nieto, S., and P. Bode. 2012. *Affirming diversity: The sociopolitical context of multicultural education*. 6th ed. Boston: Pearson.
- Official Statistics of Finland: Families [e-publication]. *Annual review* 2016. Helsinki: Statistics Finland. http://www.stat.fi/til/perh/2016/02/perh_2016_02_2017-11-24_tie_001_en.html.
- Ogay T., and D. Edelmann. 2016. ‘Taking culture seriously’: Implications for intercultural education and training. *European Journal of Teacher Education* 39, no.3: 388–400.
- Rissanen, I. *Forthcoming*. School principals’ diversity ideologies in fostering the inclusion of Muslims in Finnish and Swedish schools. *Race Ethnicity and Education*.
- Rosén, J., and Å. Wedin. 2018. Same but different. Negotiating diversity in Swedish pre-school teacher training. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses* 13, no.1: 52–68.
- Shi-xu. 2016. Cultural discourse studies through the journal of multicultural discourses: 10 years on. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses* 11, no.1: 1–8. DOI:10.1080/17447143.2016.1150936.
- Wijisen, F. 2013. ‘There are radical Muslims and normal Muslims’: An analysis of the discourse on Islamic extremism. *Religion* 43, no.1: 70–88.
- Zilliacus, H., G. Holm, and F. Sahlström. 2017. Taking steps towards institutionalising multicultural education – The national curriculum of Finland. *Multicultural Education Review* 9, no.4: 231–48. DOI:10.1080/2005615X.2017.1383810.
- Zilliacus, H., B. Paulsrud, and G. Holm. 2017. Essentializing vs. non-essentializing students’ cultural identities: curricular discourses in Finland and Sweden. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses* 12, no.2: 166–80. DOI:10.1080/17447143.2017.1311335.